

RHODE ISLAND AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-708

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631-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RHODE ISLAND AVENUE

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Location: Rhode Island Avenue extends from the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and M Street, NW, in a straight line northeast to the historic boundary of the city at Florida Avenue. It continues to the Maryland boundary, feeding into U.S. Route 1, a roadway that extends the length of the East Coast from Florida to Maine.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. Scott and Logan circles, and several of the smaller reservations are maintained by the National Park Service, while medians and several other small reservations are managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: Major artery to Northeast, D.C., suburbs and Maryland, eventually feeds into U.S. Route 1.

Significance: Rhode Island Avenue has developed along the lines of L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city. Toward its southwest end, it features several parks and vistas and traverses two National Register of Historic Places Historic Districts; the 16th Street Historic District and the Logan Circle Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The land where the avenue was planned fell within a tract of land known as Jamaica that was patented to John Peerce in 1687. In 1791, when the original proprietors donated the portions of their land that fell within the planned avenues, John Waring owned the part of the tract where this avenue is now located.¹
3. Alterations and additions:

1872:	Roadway paved with wood between Connecticut Avenue and Ninth streets, NW.
1881:	The segment of the avenue between Connecticut Avenue and 16th Street repaved with asphalt.
1930:	Roadway widened, medians installed east of 13th Street, NW.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's plan of 1791, Rhode Island Avenue originates at M Street just east of its intersection with Connecticut Avenue and continues northeast

¹ McNeil, 42, 50.

at 69 degrees. At its west end is one of the yellow-shaded open spaces, indicating that L'Enfant planned it to be maintained and developed by one of the fifteen states. The avenue intersects 16th Street at an unmarked open square, (See Scott Circle, HABS No. DC-684) and at the intersection of Vermont Avenue is a large open triangle between 14th and Twelfth streets (See Logan Circle, HABS No. DC-339). Two blocks north of this, on the Eighth Street corridor, is a large yellow-shaded square marked as "No. 15." Less than a block northeast of this square, a branch of the Tiber Creek crosses the avenue. The avenue terminates at New Jersey Avenue one block south of Boundary Street (later Florida Avenue). On his plan of 1792, Andrew Ellicott enlarged the square at 16th Street and changed the configuration of the triangular open space at 14th Street. The square on the Eighth Street corridor has been entirely eliminated.

The area designated for the avenue ran through part of Samuel Blodget's property that was called "Blodget's Wilderness Tract" since it was occupied only by a few scattered farms until the Civil War. On the Boschke map of 1857-61 several of the structures shown stand within the federally owned right-of-way between indicating that the road was uncleared.

By the end of the Civil War, Washington's population had almost doubled, prompting infrastructural improvements in the 1860-1870s. A territorial government was formed in 1871, and its Board of Public Works, under Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, paved and graded miles of unimproved streets. During the first two years of territorial rule, wood-block paving was installed on Rhode Island Avenue between Connecticut Avenue and Ninth Street, NW. Wood paving was popular because it was an inexpensive and abundant material that muffled the clatter of horses' hooves. A major disadvantage, however, was that it rotted, and by 1881 the segment of the avenue between Connecticut Avenue and 16th Street had to be repaved with asphalt. By 1887, a 30'-wide roadway was paved with asphalt and concrete to Fifth Street NW. From Fifth Street to the boundary, however, the road surface was covered only with gravel.

Coincident with the citywide paving effort, the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) run by the Army Corps of Engineers, began to identify and improve the many open spaces created by the superimposition of diagonal avenues over the grid street system. These triangles, quadrilaterals, and circles had technically been the property of the federal government since Ellicott numbered the city squares for sale and development in 1792, although prior to the late nineteenth century, few had been identified as such. Col. Orville E. Babcock, a friend of Shepherd, oversaw the OPB&G from 1871 and initiated the improvement of the parks and reservations along Rhode Island Avenue. The large intersection at 16th Street was improved as a circle flanked by two triangles--resembling a bow tie--and in 1874 a statue of Mexican War hero Gen. Winfield Scott was erected in the center. Around the same time, the large circle several blocks to the northeast at the intersection with Vermont Avenue, 13th, and P streets was laid out with plantings and meandering paths.

Private development followed these street and park improvements. The lots around the circles were developed first with large homes for Washington's elite, while the lots on the surrounding streets filled with more modest rowhouses. Among the notable people residing on the avenue was inventor Alexander Graham Bell who lived on the northeast side of Scott Circle from 1882-89 while teaching in his experimental school on the south side of the circle. By 1877, the neighborhood around the landscaped circle at Vermont Avenue, called Iowa Circle, was described

as "one of the most attractive sections of the city."² In 1893, near the southwest end of the avenue, Roman Catholic Washingtonians began building St. Matthew's Church on the north side of the avenue between 17th Street and Connecticut Avenue. Around this time, the triangular reservation in front of the church (Reservation No. 151) was sodded and planted with deciduous trees and shrubs and was enclosed with a post-and-chain fence.

As the south end of the avenue between Connecticut Avenue and Logan Circle developed as a fashionable residential area, the growth of Seventh Street as an important commercial corridor led to Rhode Island Avenue's development near the Seventh Street intersection. This region had been paved with asphalt since the mid 1880s, and the triangular reservations along it (Reservation Nos. 156, and 157) had been enclosed with cast-iron post-and-chain fences and planted with trees, shrubs, and flowers by 1883. An ornate brick and stone structure was built on the south side of the avenue at Seventh Street in 1902 to house the McKinley Manual Training School. White males were taught technical skills at the facility until it was relocated in 1919 due to overcrowding.³

The south end of the avenue continued to prosper in the early twentieth century, and the parks along it were restored in the teens to meet new design tastes, such as the reservation in front of St. Matthew's Church, which was planted as a Japanese rock garden in 1913. In 1924 the rock garden was removed and the park was redesigned to receive a monument honoring nuns who served as nurses in the Civil War. Statues of orator Daniel Webster and homeopathic physician Samuel Hahnemann were erected in the two triangles flanking Scott Circle in 1900, and the large circle at 13th Street received an impressive equestrian statue of Civil War Gen. John A. Logan in 1901.

Over the next few decades, however, the character of the avenue began to change. As part of 1890s highway legislation, the avenue was extended beyond the city boundary and became a major commuting route to the growing suburbs. The south end of the avenue between Connecticut Avenue and Scott Circle continued to prosper as many of the private dwellings were turned over to embassies and private organizations. Farther north, however, many residents of Logan Circle left the neighborhood, leaving behind homes that were converted to rooming houses. Demographically, the northern sections of the avenue always had a significant black population, and by 1928, the vacated McKinley School at Seventh Street became the Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School for black students, named for a colonel in the first black Union regiment sent into the Civil War.⁴

As the avenue became more congested, it was widened in the 1930s as part of a Works Progress Administration Program to improve the city's infrastructure. A 1937 guide book said of Scott Circle, "with its inner and outer rings of surging traffic, this is for pedestrians probably the most hazardous ground within the District."⁵ In an effort to ease the traffic bottleneck at this intersection of three major commuter routes, a tunnel was constructed in 1941 to carry 16th Street

² Annual Report . . ., 1877, 12.

³ Lee, 116-17.

⁴ Lee, 141.

⁵ Federal Writer's Project, 683.

traffic underneath the circle. On grade, the circle was also altered by the formation of four sodded traffic islands and the reduction of both the central circle and the flanking triangles to create more lanes for traffic. Similarly, Logan Circle was carved into the shape of a lemon flanked by bananas to provide through travel on 13th Street. As these projects were tearing up the roadways, many of the grand homes at the southwest end of the avenue were torn down to make way for the large office and apartment buildings and hotels that made more economical use of the rapidly inflating real estate prices.

While prosperity led to the demolition of many of the historic buildings west of 14th Street, neglect led to the deterioration of many of the buildings around Logan Circle and northeast along the avenue. This included homes as well as the Shaw School, which was judged irreparable in the 1940s and called a firetrap in the 1950s. In addition to neglect, the 1960s brought destruction to the north end of the avenue where urban riots broke out in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Soon afterward, much of the devastated area around the Shaw School was earmarked for urban redevelopment. A large, new Shaw School was built in 1977 encompassing much of the block on the north side of the avenue between Ninth and Eleventh streets. Fearing that deteriorated but historically significant buildings would be razed during redevelopment, the Logan Circle Historic District was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, and encompasses three blocks of the avenue between N and Q streets. Since then several of the historic buildings along the avenue have been renovated and converted into luxury homes and apartments.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: From building line to building line, the avenue is 130' wide.
2. Length within city limits: Within the historic city, this avenue is approximately 1.5 miles long.

B. Elements within right-of-way:

1. Roadway: This major commuter route supports three lanes of traffic each way, with curbside parking during non-rush-hour periods. A wide sodded median runs from N Street to Florida Avenue to create left turn lanes at major intersections. Traffic signals and signs are located in the medians.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: The area between the roadway and building lines features sidewalks running the full length of the avenue. Tree cuts in the sidewalks near the curb are planted sporadically with street trees of varying sizes. This strip also holds highway lamps, traffic signs and signals.
3. Major reservations:
 - a. At 16th Street, NW, traffic on Rhode Island Avenue is diverted around Scott Circle (See HABS No. DC-684).
 - b. At 13th Street, NW, traffic on the avenue is diverted around Logan

Circle (See HABS No. DC-339).

4. Smaller reservations: The following list gives the location of each reservation identified along this avenue by 1894, the date it was first recognized as federal property, the date of its first improvement, if known, and a description of its appearance historically and as of summer 1990. Unless otherwise noted, the small triangles are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS).
 - a. Reservation No. 151: South of the avenue, north of M Street, NW. This triangular reservation abutting City Square No. 160 was first improved around 1890 when it was enclosed with a cast-iron post-and-chain fence. In 1913 it was redesigned as a Japanese rock garden and redesigned again in the 1920s to receive a monument honoring the Nuns of the Battlefield. This monument was designed by sculptor Jerome Connor and architect Ward Brown, and was erected in 1924 by the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America. The monument faces southwest, and consists of a granite shaft with a 9' x 5' bronze panel portraying the twelve orders of nuns who nursed the sick and wounded in the Civil War. Originally a single reservation, it was divided into two segments in 1957 by a roadway. The northeast segment abuts City Square No. 160 and is surrounded by a concrete perimeter sidewalk. It is landscaped with a raised terrace paved with round stones and approached by pink granite steps on each side. Between the sodded southwest corner and the terrace is a flowerbed. A bed of ivy is planted behind the statue. The freestanding segment of the reservation to the southwest is paved with concrete.
 - b. Reservation No. 152: North of the avenue, west of Logan Circle, south of P Street, NW. This reservation abutting City Square No. N242 is surrounded by a concrete perimeter sidewalk and a metal picket fence and is sodded and planted with two ornamental trees. It was enclosed as early as 1894 by the adjacent landowner and continues to be maintained as such today. Its legal jurisdiction was transferred to the District of Columbia in 1956.
 - c. Reservation No. 154: South of the avenue, west of Twelfth Street, north of P Street, NW. This large, freestanding triangle was improved along with Logan Circle in the 1870s. From 1904, it featured a lodge moved from the White House Grounds to shelter the watchman who guarded and maintained the circle. The park was redesigned along with Reservation No. 163 in 1968 as part of Ladybird Johnson's city beautification program. It is now surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks with sodded street tree strips and flat concrete coping in an asymmetrical design. Mostly paved with patterned concrete, the park is planted with shade and ornamental trees in round openings and features several shrubs in planters. A large amorphous central mound is planted with trees and shrubs. Coordinated round concrete benches and tulip trash cans are scattered throughout.

- d. Reservation No. 155: North of the avenue, south of Q Street, east of Eleventh Street, NW. In 1903 several unauthorized frame structures occupied this reservation. In 1913 it was graded and surrounded with quarter round coping. When Q Street was closed in the 1960s, the reservation was attached to City Square No. 336. The remaining 1,159 square feet of the undefined open sodded area were transferred to the District of Columbia on December 14, 1972.
- e. Reservation No. 156: North of the avenue, south of Q Street, east of Tenth Street, NW (950 square feet). This triangular reservation was first improved in 1883 when it was graded and enclosed with a post-and-chain fence. In 1969 it was transferred to the District of Columbia for highway purposes. No longer distinguishable as a triangular reservation it is paved with concrete.
- f. Reservation No. 157: South of the avenue, east of Ninth Street, north of Q Street, NW. Officially identified as federal property in 1872, this large freestanding triangle was first improved in 1882 when it was planted with evergreen and deciduous dwarf-growing trees and flowering shrubs. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia in 1972 and is now surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks, sodded strips with trees, and concrete quarter-round coping. Evergreen hedges lining the south and east sides are separated from the central asphalt-paved area by ornamental metal fencing. Metal-frame, wood-slat benches face onto this central terrace that holds two square fiberglass trash receptacles.
- g. Reservation No. 158: North of the avenue, east of Seventh Street, south of R Street, NW (2,160 square feet). This freestanding triangle was officially identified by 1884 and by 1887 was planted with deciduous trees and surrounded by a cast-iron post-and-chain fence. By 1894 it featured several flowerbeds. It was transferred to the District of Columbia for Highway purposes June 30, 1969. The site of this reservation is now torn up for subway construction.
- h. Reservation No. 159: South of the avenue, west of Sixth Street, north of R Street, NW. This large freestanding triangle was first improved between 1900-01. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia along with about 300 other reservations in the city, December 14, 1972. It is now surrounded with concrete perimeter sidewalks with tree cuts and quarter-round coping. Concrete paver and asphalt walks run on axis with R and Sixth streets delineating a central sodded triangular area with two square trash receptacles and a Pepco transformer box.
- i. Reservation No. 160: North of the avenue, east of New Jersey Avenue, south of S Street, NW. This freestanding triangular reservation was roughly graded and planted with deciduous trees by 1894. It was transferred to the District of Columbia December 4, 1948, and is now connected to a median strip. The median strip to the northeast is concrete. The triangular portion to the southwest is

sodded and planted with several shade trees and an evergreen hedge and features several concrete-base, wood-slat benches.

5. Front yards: Occupants of properties along the entire length of the avenue have landscaped their front yards. Many of the rowhouses have yards enclosed with fences, and in several instances, canopies and bays jut out beyond the building lines.
- C. Framing elements: The south end of the avenue is flanked by large hotels and office buildings. While three- and four-story rowhouses line the avenue northwest of 14th Street, the right-of-way is poorly defined due to numerous vacant lots and buildings not built to the building line.
- D. Vistas: Scott Circle is visible from the avenue's origin at Connecticut Avenue. Reciprocal vistas exist between Scott and Logan circles, and Logan Circle is visible as the avenue approaches it from the northeast.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

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B. Early Views:

1927-29 Survey photographs of each reservation (photographs of reservations under NPS jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation Files; those transferred to D. C. are in the HSW Reservations Collection).

C. Bibliography:

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

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